

A Maryland pioneer

At 78, Esther McCready serves as a volunteer at the university where she broke down racial barriers 60 years ago

BY JACQUES KELLY | jacques.kelly@baltsun.com

Esther McCready never skips her volunteer visits to the University of Maryland, the school she forced to offer her an education 60 years ago when she was a hopeful, young black student.

McCready, a retired nurse and teacher, is now 78 and spends hours each month volunteering at the school's nursing museum in Baltimore, where her letter of admission is enshrined.

Civil rights scholars say it was McCready's persistence that opened the university system's doors to black undergraduate students during the days of court-sanctioned racial segregation in Maryland.

"People ask if I was bitter about what happened," she said of her initial experiences at the then-all-white school. Speaking recently at Maryland's School of Nursing on West Lombard Street, she said, "I don't allow bitterness to enter my life. Bitterness destroys you."

McCready, then an 18-year-old living on Dallas Street in East Baltimore, had graduated with honors from Dunbar High School, worked as an aide at Sinai Hospital and wanted to go to nursing school. She and a friend applied to all the nursing schools in the telephone book (they divided the alphabet and McCready took the second half), and she informed the schools she was black.

"Hers is another one of those Rosa Parks situations," said University of Maryland law professor Larry Gibson. "In both cases, women, acting on their own, just made up their minds that they were not going to accept discrimination anymore and then did something about it."

McCready received an application from the University of Maryland, where the only black students accepted were in its law school.

"I often wonder who was in that office sending out these applications," McCready said. The other schools wrote back saying that they did not allow "negroes."

McCready filled out the application and took a required medical examination from her physician, Dr. Raynor Brown. To this day, she assumes that he contacted the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, and soon she found herself being asked by an NAACP attorney why she had ap-



Esther McCready, who broke barriers at the University of Maryland, poses with her photo at the nursing school museum. SUN PHOTO: KARL MERTON FERRON

plied to the school: "Who put you up to it?"

"Nobody put me up to that. I did it by myself," McCready recalled saying.

She applied for admission to the 1949 class; the school sat on the application and did not admit her. The NAACP took up her case. Several attorneys, including Thurgood Marshall, who later served as a justice of the Supreme

Court, argued her case in Maryland courts. It took a year — McCready won on appeal — and then she faced the reality of being the first black undergraduate at Maryland. Soon, Maryland's other professional schools opened their doors, as did the College Park undergraduate program.

"I went by myself to the first day. It was a

class of more than 50," McCready said. (The friend with whom she had applied had decided not to pursue further schooling and married.) "Nobody spoke. Nobody said, 'Hi, come and join us.' Nobody said, 'Come and join us in the cafeteria.' But the dietary aides, who were African-American, were beaming at me."

On the first day, a white nurse advised her, "If you don't pray, you won't get out of here, because nobody here is for you."

McCready took the advice. "I thought to myself, 'If God intends for me to get out of here, nobody here can stop me.'"

She attended lectures and did her homework. McCready encountered resistance from the school's dean, who set up a dorm room for her in a former office separated by a floor from rooms of white nursing students.

"I never minded being alone," McCready said. "Even when I was a Dunbar student, I'd be in the library, quietly reading."

Even though McCready made it through nursing school, she still faced a segregated Baltimore. When state nursing board examinations were administered at the College of Notre Dame of Maryland, she felt she could not eat at that school. She hailed a cab with several other black nursing students, went to Pennsylvania Station's lunch counter, which she knew served blacks, then hastily returned to the school to resume the exams.

McCready graduated in 1953 and became a Baltimore public health nurse. Willing to try something new, she moved to New York City and joined the staff of New York Hospital-Cornell Medical Center, where she went on to become a head nurse in the post-operative room.

Her family was musical — her brother was a church organist — and she took courses at the Peabody Conservatory in the late 1950s. In New York, she served as a private-duty nurse while pursuing a degree at the Manhattan School of Music. She wound up teaching, becoming Raven Symone's private tutor when the child actress was part of the cast of *The Cosby Show*. She sang in the Metropolitan Opera chorus for its 1985 production of *Porgy and Bess* with Grace Bumbry and Simon Estes.

"It's been quite a life," McCready said. "People tell me I should write a book."